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ABSTRACT

In an effort to resolve some of the problems of widespread reading failure, this report investigated the way in which the language of inner-city black first graders corresponded to the language of beginning reading texts and whether or not dialect features occurred consistently in the children's speech. Twenty first grade black children were invited to select one or more picture books from a display and tell stories suggested by the illustrations. These stories served as the data base from which the language of books normally used as reading texts ("Now We Read," "In the City," and "Ready to Roll") was analyzed. Results indicated poor correspondences between words used in beginning reading instructional materials and those which are familiar to beginning readers. Clearly the children's oral language is more complex than that used in the books. Furthermore, the children were not consistently speakers of Black English--many of them produced Standard English equivalents for the dialect forms which have been reported by linguistics., suggesting that dialect by itself is not likely to present serious difficulties in beginning reading instruction. (HOD)

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LANGUAGE, DIALECT, AND PREPRIMERS

(Paper presented at the International Reading Association Convention, May 3, 1973)

The research reported in this paper was addressed to two questions: 1) How does the language of inner city black first graders correspond to the language of beginning reading texts? 2) Do dialect features occur consistently in the children's speech? The questions were investigated in an effort to resolve some of the problems of widespread reading failures in the population.

The questions were generated by four dominant issues in related literature. First, reading authorities have long advocated that reading instruction whould begin with use of language which is familiar to pupils. However, it would be impossible to implement this recommendation for inner city children according to some writers. Engelmann (9), for example, described the typical poor child as having no linguistic concepts and being ignorant of commonplace words. Black (3), more specifically, cited the lack of the concept that objects have names as one characteristic of disadvantaged children. In contrast to these views, linguists (19), (23) have insisted that the children have language abilities which have not been recognized by researchers who are unfamiliar with black children's dialect characteristics. The linguistis have, furthermore, suggested that the children's dialects may interfere with learning to read.

A fourth issue is found in recent theoretical descriptions of the reading process. Although they differ in details of explication, these, psycholinguistic, models all describe language processing as a central aspect of reading (5), (11), (20). Related experimental research (4), (18) has demonstrated that children's familiar oral vocabularies and syntax may, in fact, be related to their reading achievement, thus supporting both the psycholinguists and the more general reading recommendations cited above.

The Study

Subjects

Twenty monolingual children were randomly selected from the eight first grades in a public school in Brownsville, New York City. Reflecting the neighborhood, all were Negro, born in mainland United States, and were from low socioeconomic status families. The texts used for comparison with oral language were Now We Read (16), In the City (2), and Ready to Roll (17).

Procedure

During the first six weeks of the school year, each child was invited to select one or more picture books from a display and to tell the

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investigator stories suggested by the illustrations. The researcher was just responsive enough to encourage a flow of language from each subject in individual 30-minute taping sessions.

The books used as stimuli were generally similar to the reading texts. Contents included urban and rural residential and school settings, animals, and children and adults from various ethnic groups.

In the transcripts all words were spelled in conventional forms. Contractions were typed as two words.

Language Analysis

Vocabulary. To clarify semantic content, each word was assigned to one of six categories according to its function in a syntactic structure: nouns, verbs, auxiliary verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and function words. For example, bear was considered as a noun or a verb, depending on its usage. Webster's Third International Dictionary (21) was the basic source for classifications, with the following modifications: Pronouns were coded as a subclass of nouns (7). Words which delimited a main verb in tense or mode were assigned as auxiliary verbs (8). Words which qualified or modified verbs or adjectives were classified as adverbs (7). Words whose function was primarily to signal a following structure (those the dictionary labels articles, prepositions, and conjunctions) were assigned to the function word category (10).

T-units. The average length of a T-unit, a minimal grammatical sentence which has one main clause and any subordinate clauses related to it, provided a description of general linguistic complexity. It has been found to be an effective index of linguistic development (12), (15). Longer sentences, on the average, are characteristic of older children. In the present study, main clauses with zero realization of a copula, as in This my book, were accepted as characteristic of the children's language community (19) and were considered T-units.

In calculating lengths of T-units, obvious repeats, as in He... he ran down the street, one subject nominal was omitted. However, in the case of subject reiteration (John, he ran down the street), another construction described as characteristic of black English, both subject nominals were counted.

Syntactic structures. Three structures which could be expected in the speech of children in this age group were selected for identification. Examples of each are underlined in the sample sentences below.

Adjective+Noun: John had a funny face.
Genitive+Noun: John's face was sad.
Adverbial Phrase: John's hand was on the window.

The structures are shown in one position in each sentence above but they are permissible and did occur in other positions in the children's speech.

The occurrence of each structure was tabulated and computed as productions per 100 T-units to provide a common base for comparison.

Dialect Features. Three dialect features which have been cited as characteristic of black English (1), (10) were investigated: 1) zero realization of final /s/ or /z/ on third person singular present tense

verbs, as in John run; 2) zero realizations of a present tense singular or plural copula, as in John going; subject nominal reiteration, as in John, he go. Each feature was tabulated and computed as productions per 100 T-units if it occurred as a possible contrast to equivalent standard English forms.

Results

Correspondence of Oral and Written Language

Vocabulary. Table 1 shows that there was a poor correspondence between the words used in the preprimers and in the children's speech. Table 1a indicates that the discrepancy was not necessarily a consequence of the children's disabilities such as those described by Engelmann (9) and Black (3). The children produced a variety of words in each syntactic category. As expected, nouns made up the largest group. Auxiliary verbs and function words, which are a very limited set in English, were represented least frequently. Data reported by Levy (14) include listings of the words produced by each child and show that each one used words in each classification, with a range of 187-717 different words within the group of children.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Insert Table 1a about here

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Table 1 indicates that Now We Read contained only one noun which appeared among the children's 875 nouns. No auxiliary verbs or adjectives appeared in the book, but 28 different auxiliary verbs and 296 different adjectives occurred in speech. Of the seven verbs, two adverbs, and three function words which appeared in the book, none were used by the children.

Of the 18 nouns in In the City, only two were not produced by the children. Three of the seven adjectives in the book were not used in speech. In this text, too, there were no auxiliary verbs. None of the verbs, adverbs, or function words in the book occurred in the children's oral language but Table 1a shows that the children used, respectively, 532, 137, and 87 different words in each of these categories.

Ready to Roll contained a larger number of words than the other books and included words in all syntactic categories. However, the proportion of vocabulary in print which was not used by the children is even larger than in In the City (28 per cent compared to 13 per cent). This does not approach the discrepancy found in Now We Read (41 per cent).

T-units. Table 2 shows a striking contrast between the lengths of the children's sentences and those in Now We Read. The book had a mean T-unit length of 2.69 words and no sentences longer than five words, compared to the children's mean length of 7.03. Sentence lengths in In the City corresponded to the children's productions more closely (range of 3-12 words and a mean of 5.82) but were still generally shorter, with most of the books's sentences falling between three and six words.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Ready to Roll contained T-units which resembled the children's more than the other books did, in both range of lengths (2-21 words) and the mean (6.19). Sentences more than six words in length were characteristic of a little more than half of this book's T-units.

Syntactic Structures. Table 3 demonstrates that all of the structures occurred more frequently in the pupils' oral language than in Now We Read (71.71 per 100 T-units compared to 18.00). In fact the book made no use of two of the constructions. The Genitive+Noun did not appear in In the City but the Adjective+Noun and Adverbial Phrases occurred more often in that text than in speech (respectively, 46.23 compared to 19.25 78.57 compared to 37.41). In Ready to Roll the Adjective+Noun was found more often in the book (27.27 compared to 19.25) but the Genitive+Noun and Adverbial Phrases appeared less frequently (respectively, 6.32 compared to 15.05 and 18.18 compared to 37.41).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Dialect Features. Table 4 shows clearly that the group did not use the dialect features consistently. Furthermore, no child's speech contained all three features as a consistent pattern. For the group as a whole, a final /s/ or /z/ occurred in 27 per cent of those situations in which those phonemes would be expected in standard English. A copula appeared in 57 per cent of the appropriate constructions and 90 per cent of the subject nominals were stated only once.

In searching the transcripts for dialect patterns, it was observed that a participle verb form occurred frequently following third person singular subjects. These structures were tabulated and, as Table 4 shows, all but four of the children did use it. While nine pupils consistently produced a zero /s/ or /z/ at the ends of verbs in these situations, only three failed to use the alternative participle form.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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Every child's speech contained some copula realizations. No child reiterated a subject nominal consistently. In fact, most of the children never produced this construction.

Conclusions

The significance of the poor correspondence between words used in beginning reading instructional materials and those which are familiar to beginning readers can be evaluated on the basis of two considerations. 1) Reading experts recommend that children should be taught to read first the language which is familiar to them. 2) The speech sample described in this study is an adequate representation of a total inventory (6), (14). The discrepancies reported here between the words used in the books and those used by the children may be significant in terms of effective reading instruction.

Insofar as average T-unit lengths are indicative of linguistic complexity, it is clear that the children's oral language is more complex

than the books'. This conclusion could be interpreted as a satisfactorily cautious condition in which the beginning reader would find easy material to word with. Actually, however, some shorter sentences may represent greater syntactic complexities because of the transformations required to process the surface structures. In any event, those sentences may have important differences in construction for children who are in the early stages of learning to relate printed language to oral counterparts.

The data in Table 1 and 1a identify some of the structural features of difference between the children's sentences and the books'. The semantic-syntactic items which were in speech but not in the texts (adjectives and auxiliary verbs, for example) would lengthen sentences. Of course, they also represent conceptual ways of perceiving the world.

In those cases in which the three selected syntactic structures occurred more often in the books than in speech, it can be anticipated that the pupils will find familiar grammatical patterns. Where the reverse was true, language processing problems cannot be predicted until further research establishes whether or not the children are also familiar with the texts' constructions.

The children were not consistently speakers of black English. Most of the first graders produced standard English equivalents for the dialect forms which have been reported by linguists. Nine pupils did use one dialect feature consistently but this is probably not of great importance in reading. The final s on a thirdperson singular verb is only one clue to tense and number in a well-formed sentence. It should be noted that other black English patterns which have been reported elsewhere occurred rarely or not at all in this study's speech sample. The dialect of inner city black children, by itself, is not likely to present serious difficulties in beginning reading instruction.

Implications for Teaching Reading

Obviously, some children do learn to read when they use the books examined in this study. However, in view of the widespread reading failures in the population sampled here, schools would be well-advised to employ for these pupils an instructional strategy which has been repeatedly recommended in professional reading textbooks: begin with language which is familiar to learners.

The words and sentence structures produced by subjects in this study can be used as a basis for constructing both classroom and published beginning reading materials. The data provide language forms which are familiar to a representative sample of the selected population.

Current reading and prereading programs whihc are based on the assumption that disadvantaged children have no language knowledge should be evaluated for the possibility that they are wasting instructional time which could be used for development of new skills. The programs may be demonstrating spurious effectiveness in teaching skills the children, in fact, already have.

It can be anticipated that inner city black children's oral reading will reflect some dialect characteristics. Just as the subjects

in Baratz's (1) research repeated standard English and black English sentences in whichever dialect was more familiar to them, pupils may translate written patterns into familiar oral forms. This event is not likely to present problems to children unless their teachers fail to distinguish between reading errors and oral language differences. That is, if a child responds in his familiar dialect to the written verb form in a sentence like Jane runs home, a teacher may accept the oral realization and not interrupt the reading to insist on her dialect preference. Learning to produce her speech pattern may indeed be of value for the child. Nontheless, since beginning reading represents a complex task for most children, teachers would be well-advised to separate language and reading instruction.

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LANGUAGE, DIALECT, AND PREPRIMERS (Related data)

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Table 1 Number of words used in preprimers and not used by Brownsville first graders

	N different words in Now We Read	N words not used by children	N different words in In the City	N words not used by children	N different words in Ready to Roll	N words not used by children
Nouns	10	9	18	2	168	62
Verbs	7	0	4	0	71	9
Auxiliary verbs	0	0	0	0	13	1
Adverbs	2	0	4	0	32	2
Adjectives	0	0	7	3	52	19
Function words	3	0	6	0	32	9
Total	22	9	39	5	368	102
% of Total		41		13		28

Table 1a Number of words and different words in six categories in speech of Brownsville first graders

Category	Number of words	Number of different words
Nouns	10,327	875
Verbs	5,725	532
Auxiliary verbs	1,317	28
Adverbs	2,804	137
Adjectives	2,459	296
Function words	7,846	87
Total	30,478	1,955

Table 2 Total number and means of words and different words in speech of Brownsville first graders

Subject	Number of words	Number of different words
1	833	274
2	779	187
3	1666	351
4	1586	356
5	2020	436
6	2582	533
7	1226	266
8	1150	320
9	3956	717
10	1612	353
11	1115	269
12	835	209
13	1735	277
14	1501	371
15	1317	382
16	2033	325
17	1081	241
18	2074	405
19	631	218
20	746	235
Total	30,478	6,725
Mean	1,523.90	336.25

Note: The total number of different words does not take into account the same words which were used by all of the subjects. With the common words subtracted, the total number of different words is 1955.

Table 3 Range and means of T-unit lengths and per cents of T-units longer than three words and longer than six words in speech of Brownsville first graders and in preprimers

Subject	Range	Mean	% of T-units with more than 3 words	% of T-units with more than 6 words
1	2-16	7.00	93	50
2	2-10	5.89	89	41
3	2-18	7.96	96	62
4	3-17	5.95	95	33
5	2-18	6.50	90	40
6	3-24	8.88	97	67
7	3-14	7.03	96	51
8	3-21	6.50	94	43
9	3-20	9.52	94	54
10	3-17	6.73	95	43
11	2-17	6.93	94	55
12	2-13	6.20	94	40
13	2-15	6.76	92	45
14	2-17	6.02	94	32
15	2-13	6.08	95	33
16	3-19	7.90	94	67
17	3-13	6.40	93	39
18	3-16	6.72	95	48
19	2-11	5.69	82	33
20	3-17	6.73	97	51
All Ss	2-24	7.03	94	48
Now We Read	2- 5	2.69	7	0
In the City	3-12	5.82	86	32
Ready to Roll	2-21	6.19	90	56

Table 4 Syntactic structures per 100 T-units in speech of Brownsville first graders and in preprimers

	Adjective+Noun	Genitive +Noun	Adverbial Phrase	Total
Children	19.25	15.05	37.41	71.71
Now We Read	0.00	0.00	18.00	18.00
In the City	46.43	0.00	78.57	125.00
Ready to Roll	27.27	6.32	18.18	51.78

Table 5 Dialect features per 100 T-units in speech of Brownsville first graders

Subject	Zero final /s/, /z/ 3rd person present singular verb	Participle verb form	Zero copula	Subject Reiteration
1	100	55	44	0
2	100	62	42	0
3	33	33	40	0
4	100	84	4	0
5	100	0	0	13
6	25	43	24	0
7	66	0	33	0
8	100	0	27	0
9	50	83	36	0
10	25	75	79	0
11	50	92	60	8
12	33	73	86	0
13	100	0	67	0
14	13	50	8	50
15	75	50	22	0
16	100	40	70	0
17	100	56	82	0
18	100	50	9	0
19	0	100	20	0
20	0	92	32	0
All Ss	73	63	43	10